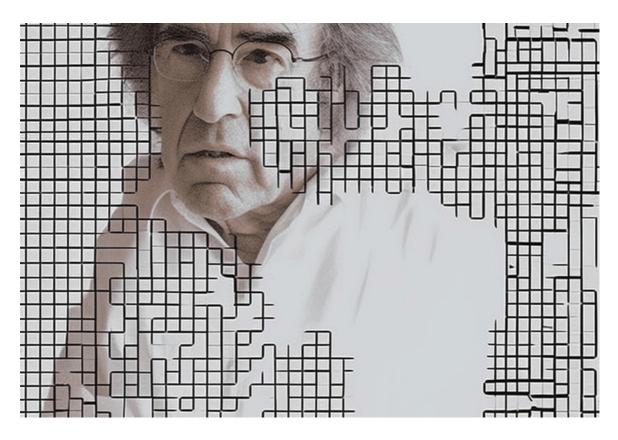SAM LUDFORD   2024-04-24

BAUDRILLARD'S SUBJECT

PHILOFICTION   BAUDRILLARD, DEATH, REALITY, SIMULATION, SUBJECT, TRANSCOMMUNISM

What follows is a long-ass Baudrillard post which began life as a collection of thoughts stimulated by Adam Wadley's essay *Transcommunism in the Transpolitical Age*, a truly valiant effort to draw out some of the positive lessons in Baudrillard's philosophy. The post then mutated and grew, and now represents perhaps my most complete attempt to unify my own interpretation of Baudrillard, centering on his implicit theory of agency or subjectivity. While the common impression of Baudrillard as a fatalistic or nihilistic thinker—as someone who has *no* theory of agency—is certainly incorrect, it is true that the constructive elements of his thought are some of the most slippery. In my opinion, drawing them out requires facing up to the uniquely challenging (and, it must be confessed, very un-Baudrillardian) task of

systematising his thought and making explicit how all its moving parts fit together. This essay will retain some touchpoints with Adam's—particularly via the notions of *poetics* and *symbolic death*—but will also diverge considerably.

One of the toolkits I have found most helpful in approaching this task over the last year or so, perhaps surprisingly, is contemporary analytic work on Kant and Hegel, and in particular the work of Robert Brandom. The core elements of Brandom's thought which will be put to use here can be distilled into three insights, which he attributes to Kant, Hegel, and the later Wittgenstein respectively.

1. To be a discursive subject is to be a knower and an agent, which consists of the ability to form judgements and intentions. For Kant, these are to be understood as mental doings or acts with contents that one is (in a distinctive sense) responsible for. Discursive subjectivity is a normative achievement: to possess it is to be bound by rules, to be the kind of creature who is able to undertake commitments and to exercise authority.
2. Kant's normativist account of discursive subjectivity replaces Descartes' ontological dualism of mental and material substance with a deontological dualism of normative and non-normative nature (between that which has obligations and that which does not). While the metaphysical origins of normative force remain mysterious in Kant, Hegel attempts to naturalise norms by situating them in social practices. As John Haugeland summarises the Hegelian slogan, "all transcendental constitution is social institution." In effect, Hegel replaces Kant's transcendental psychology with a transcendental sociology.
3. Wittgenstein provides us with a normativist account of linguistic meaning. What makes an utterance meaningful (in the first instance) is not that it represents some state of the world, but that it is authorised as a valid move by the rules of a language game. This is not to say that there is no place for the concept of representation, but just that insofar as we can properly speak of a representation relation between language and world, its meaning must ultimately be unpacked in terms of the rule structure of language games.

What these insights share is the philosophically central role they find for rules, and it is this feature that links them with Baudrillard. As anyone familiar with his writings will know, rules and games are at the heart of Baudrillard's thinking on symbolic relations. But while the importance of the rule has occasionally been noted in the secondary literature (Pawlett, 2007, p. 54), to the best of my knowledge there has been no sustained attempt at a thoroughly normativist reading of Baudrillard. By adopting the three theses above as an interpretive lens, this is what I propose. I will not attempt to show that Baudrillard holds these commitments explicitly; instead I hope to justify this stance by demonstrating how much it gets us, that is by showing how it helps to bring out the implicit unity in Baudrillard's often fragmented thinking. What this will mean in practice is treating 'the rule' as Baudrillard's master concept—the key that unlocks all the others.

This reading is thus both normativist and transcendental: it understands Baudrillard as a thinker concerned foremost with the conditions of possibility of normative force—a transcendental sociologist, a kind of dark Hegelian purged in the fires of Marx, Nietszche, and daytime television. It is not metaphysical. When Baudrillard says that the real is not what it used to be, I do not interpret this as an ontological claim, but as pointing to a historical transformation in the structure of actually existing social practices. The metaphysical tone of these pronouncements is to be understood as indicative of the depth of transformation. It is not just any social practices that have changed, but those very practices that make us what

we are—discursive subjects, or, in an idiom closer to Baudrillard's own, symbolic beings—the practices constitutive of what Hegel called *Geist*.

This may seem artificial given the increasingly metaphysical tenor that Baudrillard strikes in his later writings. But I should clarify that the approach I am suggesting is not anti-metaphysical per se. From the Wittgensteinian perspective metaphysical concepts are perfectly meaningful, but only (like all concepts) within the horizon of the language game that determines their rules of use. In his early work Baudrillard was attempting something like traditional critique: a theoretical or third-person description of the system's physics. In his later work Baudrillard is attempting something different: to address the reader directly, which is to say from one position within the system to another. He is no longer inviting you up onto the balcony to survey the arena—he is down there in the pit with you, poking you with a stick. This change in writing strategy is what is reflected in his later adoption of more metaphysical vocabulary, in my opinion, not any kind of fundamental revision in his theoretical position, which remains fairly consistent throughout.

In fact, he has very good reasons for doing this. One of the conclusions of his earlier work was that we now inhabit a socio-historical situation in which the symbolic economy is structured in such a way as to ensure that the position of critical distance adopted by the theoretical perspective has lost all authority—what Victoria Grace has dubbed his 'critique of critique' (Grace, 2000). In this respect, the aphoristic and anti-theoretical style of the later writings can itself be seen, paradoxically, as a reflection of Baudrillard's theoretical self-consistency. It also poses a problem for my own reading, which is just such an attempt to speak from the theoretic position. As I understand him, Baudrillard's objection to this strategy is not that it is wrong, or even impossible, but that it is *pointless* in the current context. You can do it, but you will not thereby have acted, whether socially or politically. I have no response to this, other than to say that this entire project is representative of my own efforts to one-up Baudrillard on this particular challenge. If the proof is anywhere it will be in the pudding.

One of Baudrillard's central themes is the disappearance of the social, or a certain deterioration in the authority of the social pact. Given the further Hegelian presupposition listed above, so long as this deterioration is understood as occurring at the deepest possible level then it also implies the eclipse of the individual subject. If we read him in the transcendental manner, we will appreciate that there are always two things going in Baudrillard: one is an articulation of the conditions of possibility of the social (his general theory of the symbolic bond), the other is an account of actual historical developments which have undercut the satisfaction of these conditions (his constructivist radicalisation of the Marxian critique of value). One of the biggest difficulties in reading Baudrillard is untangling these two lines of thought, which are interacting but distinct. For this reason the body of this post is separated into two sections, one dealing with Baudrillard's transcendental sociology, the other with its application to actual socio-historical circumstance. This separation will not be perfectly neat, but it is a start. Ultimately it is only through the relationship between these two dimensions of Baudrillard's thought that we can understand exactly why and how it is that he thinks the social has disappeared, and from this to draw out what it might mean—in his eyes—to have a conception of agency, subjectivity, and self-creation adequate to the present

moment.

Before launching in, a couple of brief exegetical notes. In earlier work Baudrillard identifies a genealogy of value which moves from a natural stage to a commodity stage to a structural stage. Later he adds a fourth, 'fractal' stage (also denying that it is a genealogy, suggesting instead that these stages coexist as 'aspects') (Baudrillard, 1993, pp. 5–6). This raises the question over which—the structural or fractal—represents the currently dominant form of value. In my view, Baudrillard's description of the fractal stage contains nothing that wasn't already implicit in the structural stage. The key point I will make use of is made in *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he says this: "the transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing marks a decisive turning point." (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6) This is the transition corresponding to the difference between the commodity and structural stages of value, and for this reason it will be my point of focus. I won't argue this point, but note it only to mark a possible point of contention.

The second note concerns the key notion of simulation. Baudrillard's usage of this term often seems inconsistent. In earlier work it appears to designate a historical or bounded phenomena, something tied specifically to 3rd-order simulacra and the structural law of value, whereas later it takes on a more general or ahistorical sense. I will use it in the second sense —on my reading simulation will designate an essential moment of the symbolic process, and is therefore ahistorical. It may take different forms in different historical situations, or under different aspects of value, but it is always present. There is some support for this in Baudrillard, and it is the line taken by certain of his interpreters, for example Rex Butler (Butler, 1999, pp. 23–24). But my primary justification for doing this is just that it makes sense. Simulation, as I read it, is simply the production of the real. What happens under the structural law of value is that this production becomes an *over*-production, which, for reasons I will come to, is equivalent to a disappearance.

1. METAMORPHOSIS, OR BAUDRILLARD'S TRANSCENDENTAL SOCIOLOGY

1.1 POETICS

This essay begins where Adam's does: with a paradox of meaning that helps to locate Baudrillard's poetics, closely related to his key concept of seduction. This is, as Adam writes, the idea that "it is impossible to speak *meaningfully* about anything." If it is impossible to ever say what you mean, then this radically negates the ambition of a purely descriptive or theoretical discourse. Against this poetics can be positioned positively as a modality of speech that does not succumb to the pretence of meaning. But what might this involve? I want to start by giving one possible answer to this question—what could be called the 'phenomenological' reading of poetics—which I take it is *not* what Baudrillard has in mind. In response I'll outline a different, Wittgensteinian answer, which I believe gives us a much better handle on Baudrillard. This will serve to anchor the normativist reading—I then go on to consider simulation, the particular poetic/seductive act of symbolic death, and finally the unification of these moments in the symbolic process of metamorphosis, with which I will identify Baudrillard's subject.

The phenomenological reading proceeds from the thought that if it is impossible to speak about the world, then a pure form of speech must be one that simply points to it. On this model, poetics aims at a different kind of contact with the ineffable, one which bypasses all the lumber of categories and concepts to bring its addressee into an unmediated, direct experience of that which is always-already subtracted in representation. Poetics is here privileged precisely because it is seen as lying outside the game of meaning altogether, connecting directly at the level of affect or experience. The phenomenological reading places poetics in an affinity with both mysticism and apophatic theology.

I do not think this is Baudrillard's position. One reason is that there is no place whatsoever in Baudrillard's thought for this pre-conceptual experiential field, something which could somehow be accessed or revealed to the subject through poetic intervention. Indeed this very notion is likely to be regarded as highly suspect by Baudrillard—as just another meaning effect, what he might refer to as the 'reality principle' of this reading. For Baudrillard the paradox runs much deeper than this—while meaning is an illusion, it is also the case that in some sense there is nothing outside of the illusion. And for this reason, Baudrillard's conception of poetics must be something much more radical and destructive than that offered by the phenomenological reading. If meaning is always illusory, a kind of staging effect, then the poetic act for Baudrillard is not the act which avoids this illusion, but that which dissolves it. Poetics is not the production of a different kind meaning, nor is it an attempt to side-step meaning by provoking an unmediated contact with Being—it is instead the *pure destruction of the meaning effect*. And since there is nothing outside of the illusion, the act which collapses one regime of meaning must always also be the act which institutes a new one.

According to Wittgenstein, to describe an utterance as meaningful is to say that it conforms to the rules of a language game. Within this framework, to say that meaning is impossible is to say that an utterance can *never* be unequivocally located as valid or invalid relative to the rules of a given language game. Consider this example of Baudrillard's:

> And so the cruel story of the woman to whom a man has written a passionate letter and who asks in her turn: "What part of me seduced you the most?" To which he replies, "Your eyes," and receives by return mail, wrapped in a package, the eye which seduced him. (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 120)

Within the context of a language game, a move can only be judged as valid or invalid on the basis of an understanding of the rules shared by all players. But in the above example we find something that problematises this: a move which conforms to the *explicit* rules of the game at the same time as breaking an *implicit* rule. This is confirmed by another example on the following page, presented by Baudrillard as analogous: "Harpo Marx showing a real swordfish instead and in place of the password 'swordfish.'" What these examples reveal is the feature that prevents an utterance from ever being fully localised by the rules: the explicit rules—the rules you could write down on paper—are never enough to exhaustively specify *all* the rules (a carefully argued version of this point was also made by Wilfrid Sellars in *Some Reflections on Language Games* (Sellars, 1954)). In other words, the rules of a game are always underdetermined by their representation, and it is for this reason that no-one can ever say exactly what they mean. At least some aspect of the game must remain implicit, or in

Baudrillard's words: secret. In these terms, then, the poetic act can be defined as a move in a language game which breaks the secret rule in a manner which cannot be challenged under the jurisdiction of the explicit rules. It is to make what Baudrillard elsewhere calls an 'impossible exchange'—in effect it destroys the game, at the same time announcing the beginning of a new one.

The poetic act is thus the *reversal* of a language game. The rich structure contained in this notion can be illustrated by a few more examples, each drawn from quite different contexts. One comes from Brechtian theatre: the technique of interruption, known in its popular guise as 'breaking the fourth wall.' In the normal operation of the modern Western theatre, the audience are separated from the fictional space of the stage like outsiders from another dimension looking in on a world which cannot look back. It is this illusion of separation that makes a 'realist' theatre possible, a theatre which can be judged by an abstract critic on the basis of its fidelity to reality (a judgement which would make no sense for a theatrical form in which the audience are treated as participants in the narrative space of the action, like pantomime or the Chinese opera (Brecht, 1936)). The staging effect which displaces the audience to a view-from-nowhere is a condition of their perception of a fidelity relation between the 'imaginary' representation on stage and the 'reality' it purports to represent. The moment a character addresses the audience directly the illusion collapses—the audience is then confronted with a simple fact of a human in front of them, and themselves as occupants of the same textual plane. What we are faced with here is the collapse of a meaning effect. In this we can glimpse the logic behind Baudrillard's assertion that "the symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of symbolic exchange and a social relation which puts an end to the real, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary." (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 133)

One final example, this time more personal to me. I studied mathematics at university, and some of the most mysterious and revered constructions in this field are those which establish a strict equivalence between results in seemingly unrelated domains. For example, I wrote my master's thesis on the equivalence between an open problem in model theory (which studies the algebraic semantics of formal logics) and an open problem in the theory of computational complexity, where 'equivalence' just means that finding a solution to any one of them also provides a solution to the other. A peculiar feature of these equivalence results is that the process of coming to understand them is not so much an experience of learning something *new* as of learning one thing *less*. You come to see that what seemed to be two radically different things had in fact been the same thing all along. Here also there is an implosion of meaning: there's an illusional quality to this shift in perspective, often accompanied by a sense of astonishment. It is not simply that something which had been there is suddenly gone; what disappears is something which had never been there and could never have been there. This is a radical form of disappearance which leaves no gap, absorbing the very space in which the illusion was staged. Here we begin to centre in on what Baudrillard has in mind when he talks about the 'illusional nature of reality'.

Incidentally, this experience of a "change in the way that things had always been" is what connects this kind of illusionality to the concept of fate, as related in the tale of *Death in Samarkand* from Somerset Maugham's play *Sheppey*, which Baudrillard draws on in

Seduction (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 72). In this fable, a merchant's servant sees Death in the market of Baghdad and immediate runs away to Samarkand, terrified it is an omen of his demise. When confronted by the merchant on why he had so menaced his servant, Death replies that he had intended no harm—he was just surprised to see him there, since he an appointment with him that evening in Samarkand. Here the fundamental paradox of fate is on display: it is the servant's voluntary actions which ensure events unfold the way they always would have. This fatal quality of seduction is what marks it as the collapse of an illusion of *meaning*, specifically—a representation relation, a disjunction between the real and the imaginary—rather than any other kind of illusion. The disappearance of the social is a fatal disappearance, in this sense. It is not experienced as the disappearance of something which once had been there, but as a sense of being haunted by something which had never been.

The point of rehearsing all these examples is to get a better handle on Baudrillard's conception of poetics, and hopefully to ward off some tempting misreadings. What we find is a complex interaction of multiple elements: the rule, the enigma/secret, impossible exchange, illusion, fate—a confluence collectively named by his key concept of seduction. To a casual reader of Baudrillard, particularly the later work, these terms may seem to operate primarily as stylistic devices, the affectations of a cultivated trickster aesthetic. But this is not right—these elements are the result of a fine-grained analysis of a distinctive logical structure. The normativist reading I am presenting interprets this as the structure of game reversal: the dissolution of the secret rule by its legal transgression.

1.2 SIMULATION AND REALITY

To speak of the illusional nature of reality is to invite paradoxical talk, and it is easy to get tangled up saying that things both do and not exist. For this reason it will be helpful to make a distinction between what I shall call 'substantial' and 'effective' reality. Something has substantial reality if it exists independently of our subjective attitudes; it has effective reality if it has causal influence in the world. Substantial reality is generally taken to imply effective reality, but the converse is not necessarily true. Indeed, Baudrillard's paradoxical formulations can be read as picking out precisely that class of phenomena which possess effective reality without possessing substantial reality. Meaning may be an illusion, but it is still the axis around which the social world is organised. Power may be an illusion, but this doesn't mean it can't kill you. It is this notion of an 'effective illusion' which marks the domain of simulation.

This idea is not original in itself, and underlies most forms of social constructivism. But perhaps no-one has unravelled the consequences of this logic more than Baudrillard. One of its simpler versions, originally analysed by Hegel and later given the term 'fetish' by Marx, can be illustrated by the example of the divine right of kings. The authority of the king is, in reality, the product of a social relation—the only reason the king commands a *de facto* authority is because it has (at some level) been acknowledged as legitimate by those over whom it is exercised. However, the king's subjects do not see things this way. To them, the authority of the king is independent of their subjective attitudes, and they perceive it rather as a natural property of this particular person, akin to the colour of his hair or the size of his feet. This is the fetishistic misrecognition: a social relation is treated as if it were a natural property, ontologically prior to (and therefore not contingent on) anyone's subjective attitudes. What is curious here is that it is precisely its mistaken treatment as a *substantial* reality that institutes

the king's authority as an *effective* reality.

There's a strange circularity in this: the social relation is only instituted as an effective reality on the basis of its misrecognition, but it is only in virtue of its effects that there is anything to be misrecognised in the first place. This circle or 'short-circuit' is key to Baudrillard's thinking on simulation, and can be approached with a more contemporary example: the (often contentious) use of game theory in neo-classical economics. A common leftwing objection goes like so: by modelling humans as rationally self-interested actors, economists make false assumptions about human nature. We are intrinsically neither rational nor self-interested, and so building our economic institutions on the assumption that we are is sure to produce bad outcomes. Economists, however, are rarely impressed by this reasoning. They reply that they are concerned not with human nature but with human behaviour, pointing to reels of empirical data showing that in the sphere of exchange humans generally do conform to game theoretic predictions. Since this is the sphere they aim to study, their modelling assumptions are justified. The question of human nature is, they argue, moot.

Simulation provides a further counter-response to the economists. This position maintains that while the empirical data is not flawed, what it measures is the *effects* of the economists' models, not some pre-existing reality which is only later theoretically reflected in them. Because these models are what are used to build our economic institutions, both formal and informal (property laws, antitrust laws, professional norms, and so on), they actively produce a situation in which people are systematically penalised for doing anything other than reasoning as if they were game theoretic actors. So of course they do. In effect these models materialise their own presuppositions, and to treat them as justified on the basis that they converge with them is to become caught in a short-circuit of self-legitimation.

Rational self-interest is here portrayed as a simulation effect: it exists as a behavioural reality, but not in any sense that precedes its modelling. It is rather the reproduced *from* the model, which then falsely portrays it as a prior state of affairs, a sleight of hand which serves only to secure its own alibi or 'reality principle.' As with the king's authority, the paradox is that the simulation remains effective to the extent that we mistakenly sign up to its reality principle— which is to say, the economists retain *de facto* legitimacy to the extent that their models are taken to reflect a basic reality, which allows for the practical implementation of the models which then materialise the behaviours that produce the illusion of legitimacy in the first place. "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none."—so begins the phoney epigraph that launches *Simulacra and Simulation*, falsely attributed to the Ecclesiastes. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1)

Simulation effects like those described above depend crucially on the fact that we are creatures of symbols, beings in whose nature it is to coordinate on the basis of shared maps. It is on this basis that social reality takes on this peculiar inverted quality in which the map actually *produces* the territory—a causal short-circuit corroding the intelligibility of any representation relation between them. On this reading, simulation is illusion put into play as an operational reality. This illusion remains operational to the extent that it is treated as a substantial reality, which is to say insofar as the map from which the territory is reproduced is misrecognised as its reflection (whether accurate or inaccurate, faithful or deceptive).

What would collapse the simulation is the exposure of this reality principle as illusion—as insubstantial, an artefact of our subjective attitudes. This is the role envisaged for the poetic or 'seductive' act: if the reality principle is the secret rule which the game depends on, then the poetic act is the lawful transgression which reveals this secret as strictly *contentless*. To take an example, if the commodity form of value is instituted as an effective reality precisely to the extent that we collectively buy into its reality principle—use-value as the ultimate referent of exchange-value—then the Marxist critique, which maintains that within the market system exchange-value is necessarily taken as an end in itself and will therefore systematically fail to deliver use-values, actively *sustains* this effective reality by ratifying its reality principle (albeit in an inverted form). To dissolve it, what is required is an intervention which exposes as sham the very notion that the exchange-value of a commodity need ultimately be moored in its use-value. Such is described by Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies* under the heading of the 'absolute commodity' (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 116): an object so self-reflexively useless and vulgar which nevertheless functions as an exemplary exchange-value, an object of pure speculation whose flaunting of its own circular weightlessness defies any attempt to ground its value in a utility.

Nevertheless, simulation is not conceived as bad in itself. In fact its 'operationalisation of illusion' is the process in virtue of which *all* the contents of consensus and social reality are produced. Simulation is what allows meaning to operate despite the fact that it is an illusion—in this respect simulation facilitates the production of all contentful mental states, beliefs and desires as well as the unconscious, items of cultural imaginary and the rules and norms of the socius. Simulation is what underwrites our very constitution as symbolic creatures. This is why it can be referred to as the production of the real. But what is crucial for Baudrillard is that simulation is always accompanied by its inverse process: seduction, the poetic act of dissolution which simultaneously collapses the old simulation and establishes the opening gambit of the new one. This reciprocal dance between simulation and seduction is what constitutes 'metamorphosis,' a term denoting the entirety of the symbolic process. As I read him, what is distinctive about the present moment is not that reality is now simulated where previously it was not, but that the reciprocity between simulation and seduction has been broken. We are now, Baudrillard tells us, caught within a historical situation in which the seductive side of the dance is indefinitely deferred, forever displaced by some imperceptible machination. The effect of this deferral is both a failure of metamorphosis and metastasis of simulation, a sort of proliferation of simulations within simulations no longer able to collapse and reconstitute themselves on the basis of a new rule. The impossibility of seduction—and consequent overproduction of the real—therefore marks a certain crisis of novelty.

1.3 AGENCY AND SYMBOLIC DEATH

With these pieces laid out on the board, we can begin draw out Baudrillard's implicit theory of agency. In Adam's piece this is approached—and I agree with this—through a specific kind of poetic act, namely symbolic death. Symbolic death does not necessarily imply a loss of biological life, but is to be understood rather as "a confrontation with radical uncertainty." What is the link between radical uncertainty and agency?

To see how Baudrillard might answer this question we need to understand agency in terms of metamorphosis: as something which emerges in the dance between simulation and seduction. Some ideas from the Kantian tradition can help clarify matters here. As already

mentioned, for Kant what distinguishes action from mere behaviour is that an action is something one has *reasons* for. On this model agency is understood as a normative capacity: to be an agent is to be capable of taking on distinctive kinds of rational commitment and to exercise distinctive kinds of rational authority. In short, behaviour becomes action only when it is brought under the jurisdiction of a rule—when it is situated within a normative space of reasons.

According to the outline I gave above, simulation is a mobilisation of an illusion to open up exactly such a normative space. Simulation sets a game in motion, and the rules of this game define a space of possible action, an ideal Player—we could say the simulation materialises a particular 'structure of agency.' Action, then, on Baudrillard's view, is action only insofar as it is localised within a normative space established as an effect of simulation. But if this were the whole story, it would provide a rather impoverished view of human agency, because it would seem to imply that all actions are pre-programmed in advance, already exhaustively constrained by the very same rules that frame them as actions. Just as true power in a referendum lies not with voters but with whoever gets to write and interpret the list of options, so true power in a game lies not with those who conform to its rules but with whoever gets to write them in the first place.

This is why seduction is required to complete this picture of agency, for seduction designates the moment at which the rules of the game are turned against themselves, or in Baudrillard's phrase, reversed—the move which simultaneously collapses the game and establishes the new rule that announces the next one. (A new rule which is then perceived retroactively as the rule that had been in play all along: the fatality of seduction). Seen from the point of view of agency, seduction—whose possibility lives in the necessary gap between the explicit and implicit rules of any game, the underdetermination of the latter by the former—thus represents the capacity of an agent to change its own structure. In this capacity we can locate the distinctive characteristic of Baudrillard's subject, who is not merely the player of a game whose rules have been fixed in advance, but the participant in an eternal and 'open' game where the rules themselves always remain on the table as stakes to be played for.

Here the connection between seduction and symbolic death becomes clear: the moment of seduction always marks a metamorphosis in the structure of agency. It is both the death of the subject as constituted by the old simulation and the initiatory birth of the subject as constituted by the new one. Read this way, Baudrillard's emphasis on symbolic death bears an affinity to the Hegelian theme of self-constitution through sacrifice. An example, given by Brandom in his recent work on Hegel's Phenomenology, is the samurai code of Bushido.

> It required ritual suicide under a daunting variety of circumstances. To be samurai was to identify oneself with that ideal code of conduct. In a situation requiring seppuku, either the biological organism or the samurai must be destroyed, for the existence of the one has become incompatible with the existence of the other. Failure to commit biological suicide in such a case would be the suicide of the samurai, who would be survived only by an animal. The animal had been a merely necessary condition of the existence of the samurai (like the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere, which is important to us, but with which we do not just for that reason count as identifying ourselves.) No doubt even sincere and committed samurai must often have hoped that such situations would not arise. But when and if they

> *did, failure to act appropriately according to samurai practices would make it the case that*
> *one never had been a samurai, but only an animal who sometimes aspired to be one. One*
> *would thereby demonstrate that one was not, in oneself, what one had taken oneself to be,*
> *what one was for oneself. The decision as to whether to risk one's actual life or to surrender*
> *the ideal self-conception is a decision about who one is. (Brandom, 2019, p. 238)*

The symbolic death of the biological animal is also the symbolic birth of the samurai, an act of self-constitution (or metamorphosis) achieved by staking one's biological life. (Note the fatal quality of this act: if when those circumstances arise one fails to commit *seppuku*, one proves that the stake had never been a real stake, thus *making* it the case that one *had never been* a samurai.)

While symbolic death need not coincide with biological death, or even the risk of biological death, the extremity of this example, in which the act of self-constitution takes the form of a radical negation of the life instincts, illustrates how symbolic death is always also a confrontation with radical uncertainty. Typically, what this requires is placing oneself under an unconditional obligation. To do so is to put something essential at stake—what makes the uncertainty radical is that one can never anticipate or estimate the future costs or benefits at the time of placing one's bet. The risk is unquantifiable (not even in principle). Symbolic death is not an irrational act, in the strict sense of being enacted in the face of an unfavourable cost-benefit analysis. It is rather arational, in the sense that it is enacted in the complete absence of any criteria that could support a meaningful cost-benefit analysis. It is therefore incompatible with any rationale of investment. In this respect, Baudrillard's symbolic death is similar to Kierkegaard's leap of faith. These rational criteria are absent precisely because symbolic death is an act of metamorphosis, of self-constitution: what is prospectively irrational may become retrospectively rational from the point of view of the new subject produced as a result of the act. This follows the logic of the Spartacus effect: the first escaped slave to stand up and say "I am Spartacus" necessarily places their life in a radically uncertain danger, but at the same time this act provides the credible signal for others to do the same; as more do so the risk drops to zero. But this is a judgement which could never have been made prior to the initial leap of faith. It is this radically uncertain act which institutes the community of slaves as a collective subject, which then retroactively absorbs these actions into its own sphere of rational agency. Baudrillard's theory of the subject thus consists of two elements, corresponding to simulation and seduction respectively: the operationalisation of illusion to institute a normative space of possible action (symbolic birth), and the capacity to collapse the illusion to reconfigure it on the basis of a new rule (symbolic death).

2. METASTASIS, OR THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SOCIAL

2.1 INTRO

As mentioned earlier, the model outlined above provides a means of understanding how agency can be undermined: the reciprocity between simulation and seduction is broken. Insofar as this is advanced as a description of our present situation, it is not simply the claim that social reality is now simulated where previously it might not have been. Social reality has always been simulated, and couldn't not be. It is rather the claim that the permanent displacement of the seductive moment has undermined the symbolic process of death and

rebirth which is essential to genuine agency. Metamorphosis is blocked; simulation goes into metastasis. Somehow a sleight of hand occurs, a tacit deferral ensuring the confrontation with radical uncertainty is always-already postponed.

How can this be unpacked? We can begin by considering a few recommendations for responding to the present moment that might be inferred from a naive, face value reading of Baudrillard. For instance we might think of that quintessential postmodern trope: irony. Not only is irony a topic Baudrillard treats with approval in several places (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 29), it also fits neatly with the theory of poetics sketched above. If I dress like an 80's nerd ironically I am both presenting a style and implying that there is nothing at stake in a style, that it is no more than an arbitrary costume. To be ironic is to play the game in a way that implicitly mocks its presuppositions—does this form of irony not then qualify as a legitimate poetics, a form of game reversal? Indeed, couldn't many tropes from 1990's culture and arts be taken in parity with Baudrillard's recommendations? Does Damien Hirst's notorious artwork *For the Love of God*—the staggeringly garish platinum skull studded with no less than 8601 diamonds—not perfectly implement the fatal strategy of the absolute commodity, for instance?

These examples appear to present us with a problem. Because it must be admitted that from the heady vantage of 2022, none of these strategies look particularly promising any more. Postmodern irony and self-reflexivity did not open up a new space for self-creation beyond the homogenising reach of mass media. Instead they were appropriated by advertising, like the surrealist techniques that came before them. Hirst's skull did not send the art market into a symbolic death spiral. Instead he got rich, and now we have NFTs. No-one has ever actually broken the internet, and despite the promises of countless sci-fi films we are yet to encounter the message that can destroy its medium.

2.2 TWO FATED STRATEGIES: DRAG AND THE ABSOLUTE COMMODITY

Responding to this challenge calls for a more nuanced reading of Baudrillard, which in certain cases will mean reading him against himself. The absolute commodity is instructive here, as in my opinion it is a case where Baudrillard's recommendation is in conflict with his own analysis. We can take Hirst's skull as an example. The aim of the gambit is a seduction, a game reversal: by making tangible the sheer speculative weightlessness of the commodity it mocks the false alibi of utility—the very illusion that allows the social practice of market exchange to continue to function as effective reality. But it does not work. Why not? It could be argued that it simply fails to implement the strategy, but I do not think this is sustainable: it is difficult to think of anything that plays the move described by Baudrillard more faithfully. So why is it simply absorbed by the speculative logic of the art market, rather than presenting a forceful challenge to it?

If we read his earlier writings, I believe we find the answer provided by Baudrillard himself: it reverses the wrong game, one that is no longer in play for real stakes. A point made repeatedly by the Baudrillard of the 70's is that the entire dialectic of use-value and exchange-value, which belongs to the game described by the 'commodity law of value,' is no longer active—it has been absorbed as a 'satellite' by an entirely new situation, one which obeys a different logic. This is the the 'structural law of value,' which defines the symbolic

economy of the postmodern situation (it is this point that distisguishes Baudrillard's position from that of the Situationists). Under the commodity law of value, the commodity pretends to be a utility. This is the pretence exposed by the absolute commodity. But under the structural law of value, the commodity does not pretend to be a utility—it *pretends to pretend* to be a utility. In Baudrillard's language, it is a 3rd-order simulacrum. But if this is the case, then the absolute commodity does nothing to reverse the game. In fact by exposing the inner pretence with glitz and fanfare it becomes a complicit party in the outer pretence, effectively propping up the illusion that the commodity was pretending to be a utility.

The thread of this argument can easily get confusing, and is worth reiterating with a second example. For this we can turn to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as explored by Victoria Grace in her book *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading*. In Butler's treatment gender is understood as something like a simulation: not unreal but insubstantial, an effect of its performance rather than something which precedes it as its referent. "This social reiteration of gender through the repetition of discursive acts serves to create the fiction of a 'natural' reference point which precedes and underpins the material realness of sexual difference." (Grace, 2000, p. 61) This bears some resemblance to the role of the commodity under its own law of value: where the commodity pretends to be a utility, so the performance of gender identity pretends to be the expression of a prior natural fact. In Butler this analysis is pushed into the service of an emancipatory project, whose aim "is to subvert '(gender) identity' through exposing the fiction of its 'natural' underpinnings." (Grace, 2000, p. 61) One mode of subversion emphasised by Butler is parody, and specifically drag. This idea of playing with gender as montage, as mask, as a theatre, aims to subvert by foregrounding, amplifying and reversing the performative dimension of gender to such a degree that it is exposed *as* performance, mocking the very notion that gender identity is anchored in a natural referent.

Clearly this has much in common with the absolute commodity, and as such will share its limitations. As Grace puts it,

> *If Butler's analysis is couched in apparently universally applicable terms, there is a danger that her contemporary claim of subversion might in fact be historical. In other words, a subversive strategy designed to parody sexual difference with a view to undermining its anchoring in the ontological inevitability of anatomy is indeed subversive when the dominant structuring of gender difference does rely on such a natural reference. If, however, we accept Baudrillard's claim regarding the loss of the great 'natural' referent [...], then the subversive character of the exposure of the fictive nature of the 'natural' underpinnings of gender difference at this precise historical juncture is less compelling. To claim that there is no 'true gender identity' might no longer be attacking the roots of the structural configuration of gender in the contemporary hyperreal era. (Grace, 2000, pp. 61–62)*

The claim of Baudrillard's referred to is that of the passage from the commodity to the structural law of value, after which representations (of gender, value, authority, truth, etc) no longer legitimate themselves on the basis of fidelity to this 'natural' referent. The impetus behind this claim can perhaps be best demonstrated by modern advertising. Take, for instance, this immensely successful Old Spice campaign:

There's a certain form of criticism which still insists on treating this as straightforward pretence, that is to say as an attempt to sell the product on the basis of a fictional true masculinity. This type of critic imagines their task as exposé, to lay out in revealing detail the mechanism by which this 'true masculinity' is constructed as an effect of discourse, in this case by the covert messaging in advertising. But one glance at this ad shows something amiss with this line of thought: it is clearly self-parodic. There is no 'covert' messaging, no latent discourse to be brought to the surface by careful critique. It presents no 'true masculinity,' but something more like a drag masculinity, where the object of parody is precisely that older form in which masculinity was presented as something to take seriously. It pretends to pretend. But just as the effortless absorption of Hirst's skull by the art market presents a problem for the absolute commodity, so this example presents a problem for Butler's project of subversion. Because if the parody of gender through drag truly does subvert its structural configuration, then how is it so easily mobilised by advertisers to sell gender targeted products? Is the advertising industry to be welcomed as an ally in the struggle for liberation from gender identity? I think not. What we should conclude is that the structural configuration has changed, and that advertisers are simply one step ahead of the game in their exploitation of it.

2.3 THE SOCIETY OF THE LARP

The manner of failure of these two strategies reveal something of the inner workings of the structural law of value—the rule of the game corresponding to the *present* form of simulation. They each treat as pretence what is in reality a pretence of pretence, in effect writing its own alibi for it. In this we begin to see how this game performs the sleight of hand that indefinitely defers its reversal. It is a subtle form of misdirection in which the dead simulations of the past are resurrected in drag—games within the game, the pretence within the pretence—set up only for the sake of their theatrical reversal. It provides a simulation *of* seduction, which is now freed from the burden of its confrontation with radical uncertainty. The problem with Hirst's skull is not, then, that it fails to reverse the secret of the commodity form, but rather that it does so almost *too* perfectly, with a kind of aesthetic attention to detail only possible from a position exterior to it—a position of non-participation, a position with no live stake—just as it is

only possible to admire the rattlesnake's scales when one is no longer inside the tank with it. Baudrillard made a similar point about Foucault: "Something tells us—but implicitly, as if seen in a reverse shot of this writing too beautiful to be true—that if it is possible at last to talk with such definitive understanding about power, sexuality, the body, and discipline, even down to their most delicate metamorphoses, it is because at some point *all this is here and now over with*." (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 30)

Against the background of this analysis, postmodern irony can be seen as something of a transient form, a last-ditch attempt to protest a structural configuration that had not yet fully taken hold. Irony is the attitude appropriate to the society of the spectacle, to an audience of passive observers still capable of understanding themselves as such. But this is an image still under the spell of the natural referent, even though in this case it is only felt through its absence, in the mourning for a lost real. But the passage to the structural law of value represents something far more radical: the dissolution of the auditorium itself, the very external space that gives the spectacle its determination *as* spectacle. With the loss of auditorium the audience also lose their ability to grasp themselves as spectactors. Instead they are recast as characters on the stage, plunged into the hyperreal form of participation: the society of the spectacle becomes the society of the LARP.

> *Today this critical energy of the stage—not to mention, of course, its power of illusion—is in the process of being swept away. All that theatrical energy goes into the denial of the scenic illusion and into anti-theatre in all its forms. […] Illusion is proscibed; the scission between stage and audience is abolished; theatre goes down into the street and into everydayness; it claims to invest the whole of the real, dissolve into it, and at the same time transfigure it. […] This is no longer the famous Aristotelean catharsis of the passions. Rather, it is a treatment of detoxification and reanimation. Illusion is no longer valid here: it is truth which bursts into free expression. We are all actors and spectators; there is no more stage: the stage is everywhere; no more rules: everyone plays out his own drama, improvising on his own fantasies. (Baudrillard, 1990, pp. 62–63)*

In this new mode past taboos return only to be transgressed, and dead forms of power are resuscitated only to be unmasked. In all cases it is the absence of any real stakes in the game which allows them to be played to extremes, just as the hand can be played with more daring and flare when there's only matchsticks to lose. You call yourself a Marxist-Leninist and define yourself against an industrial order that no longer exists, in the name of a proletariat that no longer exists. You make a career as an artist with your subversive critiques of hidden exploitation in the art world—for this the art world pays you gladly. Advertising sells you a self-consciously performative masculinity; you can wear it as a trad aesthetic, or deconstruct it in the name of gender liberation—it doesn't matter which, since both are pre-programmed characters in the LARP. The mood that pervades the hyperreal form of participation is no longer the irony of the disenchanted spectator, but a kind of shallow gloss of sincerity best summarised in the phrase *irony-not-irony*.

2.4 THE SECRET RULE OF POSTMODERNITY

What are we actually describing here? What *is* the structural law of value, exactly? As argued earlier, for Baudrillard agency is linked to the possibility of game reversal. But from within any

given historical situation, metamorphosis can only be achieved by a reversal of the particular game that corresponds to its structural configuration. The structural law of value blocks metamorphosis by a misdirection at precisely this level, deploying a hyperreal arcade of phoney games in endless shadow play. But the question we must ask is this: what is the nature of the outer game, the game corresponding to the structural law itself, the *only* game that is being played for real stakes? What is its secret rule?

Baudrillard has already told us the answer, in the passage quoted above: it is the game in which the secret and only rule is *that there are no rules*. Since this rule remains effective only to the extent that it remains secret, this game is expressed—paradoxically—in a massive over-production of the signs of commitment. One throws oneself into personal development, a political cause, a project, a hobby, an aesthetic, a thing. But the intensity of this activity is underwritten only by the fact that these are, in the final analysis, not really 'commitments' at all—they exercise no true normative constraint, acting as provisional choices that can be reversed at any point. This is an entirely new form of simulation, based on 3rd-order simulacra specifically (the development which in earlier work Baudrillard identified as inaugurating the era of simulation proper)—it's secret rule is not a reality principle, but what could perhaps be better termed a 'liquidity principle.' Its imperative does not take the form, "you should act like an x because you are an x," but rather the form of temptation, "you should try this because there is nothing to lose—it's just a costume, and can always be returned to the shop later."

The principle of non-obligation could equally be interpreted as a principle of universal equivalence—to say that one is never obliged by one's chosen signifiers is to say that these signifiers are infinitely exchangeable. In this respect, the true spirit of this game is to be found not in any particular signifier or costume, but in the moment of exchange itself, the moment at which one costume is removed and replaced by a new one—in their sheer commutability. It no longer matters whether you believe in astrology or think that it's nonsense, the *jouissance* of this game is located precisely in the fact that this question no longer has to come up. One is free to maintain the mantle of scientific seriousness in one context and don the trappings of the occult in another, or oscillate between them in the same one. Nor is one expected to provide a rational synthesis which renders them compatible. They exercise no normative constraint over one another whatsoever—to question this inconsistency is, within the context of this game, to commit a *faux pas*, to betray the knowing wink that authorises this equivalence of incompatibles. What is at issue is not the *metaphysics* of truth—whether there is some fact of matter, or even could be some fact of the matter—but that the social-linguistic practice corresponding to the categorial concept of representation has now been absorbed by a different one, in which the pact between representation and represented (the demand that the former be held to the tribunal of the latter) has been broken. What replaces it is a fascination for exchangeability as such, what Baudrillard sometimes called the 'ecstasy of commutation.'

The extent to which Baudrillard breaks with the spirit of Marx's critique of value is a complex question, and I won't attempt to untangle it here, but it's worth briefly noting how the above line of thought interlinks with the question of commodification. Fredric Jameson once described postmodernism as "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (Jameson, 1991, p. 4), and it is fair to say that Baudrillard's elaboration of the structural law of

value is in parity with this formula. If commodification is understood as a certain process of abstraction, in which what is singular and unique is severed from its lifewold entanglements and circulated on the market as a contextually indifferent repeatable, then what Baudrillard describes is just the application of this process to itself: the abstraction of abstraction. What Baudrillard stresses perhaps more than Jameson is that this indicates a radical break, since what is now valorised in the market is not an abstraction *of* something, but pure abstraction as such. It is for this reason that the serial form takes on such weight in postmodernity, the kind of sheer repetition-with-variation that only pretends at fidelity to an original, singular referent, a logic of pure seriality to be found perhaps most vividly in Instagram accounts, where, as social media sharks know well, success rides entirely on the capacity of the series to hang together *as* a series, rather than on the qualities of its terms taken alone. It is the same logic demonstrated by the paintings of Andy Warhol, analysed extensively by both Baudrillard and Jameson.

2.5 REVERSING THE GAME: RULE, LAW, AND DESIRE

Without a doubt, Baudrillard's theory of 3rd-order simulacra and the structural law of value present a uniquely rich framework for explaining many of the contradictions in the present cultural, political and media environment—contradictions which have only amplified since his death in 2007. But our present concern is the question of agency, and for this we must ask: how is this game to be reversed? How does one break its secret rule? There's now enough scaffolding in place to give an answer to this: if the secret rule is that there are no rules, then the way to reverse this game is simply to *observe a rule*. It doesn't matter which. Within the situation governed by the structural law of value, the only true subversion is the recognition, in practice, of an unconditional obligation.

This suggestion may seem to align Baudrillard with kind of conservatism. To see that this is not the case, we must make a distinction on which Baudrillard places great emphasis. This is the difference between rule and law:

> *Ordinarily we live in within the realm of the Law, even when fantasizing its abolition. Beyond the law we see only its transgression or the lifting of prohibition. For the discourse of law and interdiction determines the inverse discourse of transgression and liberation. However, it is not the absence of the law that is opposed to the the law, but the Rule. (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 131)*

The difference between rule and law is a difference between two ways of conceptualising authority. The law is understood to exercise authority regardless of whether it is acknowledged as authoritative by those over whom it is exercised. Conservatism operates on the basis of the law, with tradition typically understood as the locus of its *sui generis* authority. One has one's obligations, regardless of whether or not one takes oneself to be obligated. To fail to recognise one's obligations is, on this model, to be *factually* incorrect, to be in a state of cognitive error. In contrast, a rule is purely conventional. It exercises authority only to the extent that it is recognised as authoritative by those over whom it is exercised. The rule is much more closely associated with what we would usually think of as a game, where there is no prior fact about whether one is obliged by the rules or not. It makes no sense to ask whether the rules of chess are intrinsically authoritative—either you are playing the game or

you are not, and to cheat is simply to no longer be playing.

The interplay between rule and law can be illustrated by returning to the earlier example of the divine right of kings. Recall that at the level of reality, the king's authority depends on its being treated as legitimate by his subjects: it has the structure of a rule. But paradoxically, the king's authority is instituted as a rule precisely in virtue of its misrecognition as a law. This law takes the form of a reality principle, or the fiction of a natural referent: the king's authority is seen as a natural property, independent of the subjective attitudes of those over whom it is exercised. While Baudrillard is not a conservative, he does help us to understand why it is that conservatism exercises such a strong political draw at the present moment. Social reality is constituted by rules, not by laws. But under certain circumstances, as the example of the king demonstrates, the imposition of a law is an effective way to institute a rule. The force of conservatism's appeal to tradition as a source of law lies, then, in its potential to reinstitute the rules that have been liquidated by the structural law of value, reopening a space for real stakes and thus for self-constitution.

But just as Baudrillard helps us to grasp the contemporary appeal of conservatism, he also shows us why ultimately it must fail. The problem is that in its appeal to the law, it tries to institute the rule by installing a reality principle, a fictional 'before' of society that wields a unilateral authority over it, a kind of Platonic ideal of tradition from which its norms derive their force. But this appeal to a natural finality of the law is precisely what is rendered ineffective by the structural law of value, under whose jurisdiction referentiality itself lives only a phantom existence. As such, conservative traditionalism is easily absorbed as one more character in the LARP, as demonstrated in the nostalgic cosplay of online 'trads' who adopt an aesthetic of 18th century rural life that was fabricated by advertisers in the 1950's. The power of Baudrillard's critique is that it accounts for the failure of both conservatism (with its emphasis on traditional law) and liberalism (with its emphasis on the liberation of individual desire), two political projects that appear to occupy opposite polarities, in a single breath: they both fail to institute a binding social pact because the installation of a reality principle cannot perform this function under the structural law of value. In this respect desire is the mirror image of the law.

2.6 SELF-LEGISLATION AND THE RULE-FOLLOWING PARADOX

If this is the case, then what is required is not a rule whose authority is established only on the basis of its misrecognition as a law, but a rule recognised as a rule: whose authority is explicitly understood as conditional on its recognition. Only this can escape absorption by the structural law of value. One example of how this might work is the Kantian concept of autonomy, which offers a theory of normative force. On this model, one is understood as being properly bound only by the rules one applies to *oneself*. For Kant, the capacity to bind oneself to a rule is the practical ability that forms the basis of our discursive subjectivity, the thing that makes us beings capable of self-creation. This model is inherently individualistic, with the authority of the rule established as a matter of immediate self-relation: my own subjective acknowledgement of the rule is understood to directly institute its authority over my action. Recently this model has enjoyed something of a popular revival among wellness practitioners and self-development programs, as with Jordan Peterson's indictment that the path to a meaningful life lies in taking on responsibilities to oneself. If the way to recover a

space for self-constitution under the structural law of value is truly to be found in the observance of a rule, then this would seem to be a promising avenue.

But this model also has its problems. Understanding them will help to tease out some of the more subtle aspects of Baudrillard's theory of agency, namely the role played by otherness and the 'dual' relation. The problem is that it is difficult to see how a rule that is self-prescribed could ever carry a genuinely binding authority. One argument alongs these lines is found in Wittgenstein's private language argument, which was later developed by Kripke into a generalised rule-following paradox (Kripke, 1982). If I place myself under a rule on Monday then on Friday find myself with a desire that contradicts it, then on what grounds should I follow the past rule instead of the present desire? It seems that if I have the authority to bind myself to a rule, then I will also be able to exercise the same authority to unbind or reinterpret it later. To put it another way, if a rule derives its authority only from my own voluntary submission to it, then the content of that rule would seem to be inherently unstable. This problem has nothing at all to do with will power as it is commonly understood—it is a logical problem that derives from trying to establish the authority of a rule on the basis of a *single* locus of account.

This point is significant in relation to the earlier analysis of the structural law of value. Read a certain way, claims such as that we are in the 'society of the spectacle' or the 'society of the LARP' seem to suggest a kind of psychological failing, as if the problem were just that we have a bad attitude, or have succumb to spiritual malaise. But this is not the case—these terms indicate configurations in our deepest social practices of sign exchange, and social practices are structured by rules. What the above point gestures to is the fact that rules are unintelligible as rules (i.e. as possessing genuine normative force) unless they are shared—this both implies that the authority of a rule can only be made intelligible within the context of a community of rule-followers, and, on the flip side, that a rule's authority over an individual does not necessarily disappear the moment they personally cease to acknowledge it, as long as there remains a common perception that others acknowledge it, and acknowledge them as acknowledging it, etc. As far as the rule that there are no rules goes, this means that it will not be enough for individuals to directly self-legislate, since this in itself will not affect the common perception.

If it were simply a matter of self-legislation, then questions of mediation (whether technical or social) would not have relevance for the line of thought being pursued here. Instead the entire problem of the disappearance of the social would become a matter of personal development (and indeed there are many these days who do seem to see things this way). But this problem is not one that is ultimately located in individual subjectivity, although it is certainly expressed through it—the problem is rather located one step lower, in the social practices and institutions that endow individual subjectivity with its transcendental constitution. If we read Baudrillard as committed to this Hegelian model, as I think we can, then what is at stake in the disappearance of the social is always also the disappearance of the subject as such. Drives are only rationally structured as 'desires' with intentional contents (i.e. as desires *for*) when normatively situated as reasons for action by socio-linguistic practices—it is in this sense that 'the passion for rules' always works on a level prior to that of desire, because it is this underlying negative impulse which facilitates the structuration of (positive, i.e. productive)

drive as contentful desire.

2.7 THE DEMAND OF THE OTHER: FROM SACRIFICE TO CHALLENGE

The idea that a rule must be shared in order to have a determinate content is the insight that makes sense of Baudrillard's repeated claim that seduction is a dual relation, always implying the presence of another. This places Baudrillard's view closer to the model of 'mutual recognition,' the Hegelian response to Kant's self-legislative framework. In this model, the authority of the rule over my action is not established purely on the basis of my recognition of it—as we have seen, this is insufficient—but rather on the grounds of the authority I grant to *another* to hold me to the rules *we* have placed on *ourselves*. When mutual this structure is symmetric—it is the dual relation in which the authority of the rule is mediated through the mutual recognition of each participant of the others' authority to hold them accountable to it. Since responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the rule is now distributed across two or more loci of account, this model seems to avoid the problem presented by the rule-following paradox, and the content of the rule is stabilised as a binding authority over the actions of those who recognise it. Their recognition of the rule is no longer a matter of immediate self-legislation, but is rather mediated through their recognition of the other. To put this point another way, rules are intrinsically public.

It is the intrinsic publicity of rules, and the dual relation that necessarily mediates their binding authority, that make the question of media, communications technology, and their political economies so important for Baudrillard. There is a whole other story to be told here about what kind of signalling systems (signalling in the sense of non-semantic information transfer, as it can be imagined between neurons or computers or other purely causal, which is to say non-symbolic, systems) are required as the enabling conditions of dual relations. The leap of faith has already been identified as the initiatory act which establishes a symbolic pact. But it is only able to do so insofar as it is addressed to another, and it is the other's recognition of the act which allows them to reciprocate—only once they have done so is the symbolic pact established. This consideration reveals something: if the symbolic pact is to be established by the leap of faith, then it must be possible for the other to whom it is addressed to read it *as* a leap of faith. There are thus two things required to institute a symbolic pact: i. its parties must be prepared to undergo symbolic death, and ii. they must be able to read one another's actions *as* symbolic death, which is to say as credible signals of unconditional self-sacrifice. It is in this second condition that communication structures are implicated, and it is here that Baudrillard locates a problem. The structural law of value does not undermine our ability as individuals to make leaps of faith; what it undermines is the capacity of such acts to ever become publicly readable as such. It is not so much that we *cannot* bind ourselves to rule under the structural law of value, but that we can never read the other as bound by the rule, which in turn means we never have a good *reason* to bind ourselves.

Incidentally, it is this point which marks a divergence between Baudrillard and Hegel. For Hegel, the category of action foundational to the social or symbolic pact is *sacrifice*. For Baudrillard it is not sacrifice, but *challenge*. We can see that these correspond to the two conditions described above. In the Hegelian model, the symbolic pact is instituted when its parties sacrifice what they are in themselves for something they take themselves to be, as illustrated vividly in the example of the samurai, where biological life is put on the line for the

sake of an ideal code of conduct. This process defines a dialectical logic of sacrifice and self-constitution. It is dialectical because its terms are historically mutating: what is seen as self-sacrifice prospectively from the viewpoint of the prior agent (the biological animal) is retrospectively seen as an act of self-constitution by the posterior agent (the samurai). Whether a given act represents self-sacrifice or self-creation is simply a matter of perspective: looking backward we find a history of progressive self-articulation, looking forward we find only radical uncertainty.

But if this process is to truly be a process of self-creation—if it is to be capable of actualising new structures of agency, with new causal powers—rather than to merely track changing self-conceptions in the purely cognitive sense, then the new self-conception will have to successfully coordinate the actions of those who bear it. Sacrifice, as the the provision of a credible signal, is one aspect of this, but the second aspect is also critical, namely the reading of this signal as credible by those to whom it is addressed. Looked at from this side of things, sacrifice is received as *the challenge to sacrifice in return*. The role of sacrifice in self-constitution thus depends on a deeper capacity of the medium that links participants to carry it as a challenge. By placing emphasis on this side of nexus, Baudrillard uncovers a symbolic logic of challenge and counter-challenge that lies beneath the dialectical logic of sacrifice and self-constitution. Where the Hegelian model does not raise questions about the medium of signification in which the sacrificial actions are staged, it is precisely here that Baudrillard draws our attention. It is for this reason that questions of media and political economy are crucial for Baudrillard. The problem for Baudrillard is not how to recover the possibility of sacrifice (for this was never lost), but how to recover the possibility of challenge.

2.8 THE STRATEGY OF DOUBLE REFUSAL
(OR, THE POTLACH OF SIGN VALUE)

I won't broach these questions about technical mediation here, as this would be too much of a digression (elsewhere I have linked the publicity of rules to the concept of common knowledge, and considered the market as an expressive medium which systematically filters out messages conveying unconditional sacrifice). As far as the present line of thought goes, the state of play is this. The deep game represented by the structural law of value is defined by the secret rule that there are no rules; reversing it is therefore a matter of observing a rule. This cannot be achieved by the imposition of a reality principle, whether of law or desire, because the referential mechanism this depends on is rendered obsolete by the structural law. Nor can it be achieved by a pure act of Kantian self-legislation, because in bypassing the other it fails to secure the binding authority of the rule. Genuine authority *requires* mediation, and it is for this reason that game reversal must in the first place take the form of a commitment to a rule conveyed as a challenge to the other to commit in turn. While this commitment must be unconditional (and thus incorporating radical uncertainty) it is not fundamentally a moral commitment, but a symbolic commitment, as in the commitment one makes to risk one's own life when challenging another to a duel. It is the fronting of a non-fungible stake.

Say you quit your job on a point of ethics. This is a form of sacrifice, and since it is sacrifice for moral reasons it is implicitly other directed. But is it a challenge? Insofar as it is, it is a challenge directed foremost at your former co-workers. In giving up your job on grounds that

the company is engaged in unethical practices, you implicitly challenge anyone else who works for this company to either do the same or provide reasons why they shouldn't have to. This challenge is made credible by the sacrifice of your job, the destruction of some career capital. Being responsive to this kind of challenge is part of what it is to practically identify as a moral agent, and so to fail to meet it is, in a certain sense, which is to say in a symbolic sense, to die. This is why the challenge has force. The moral sacrifice pertains to a particular moral commitment or content; the symbolic challenge pertains to the reciprocal structure of the practical identity which constitutes moral agency itself as an effective reality.

So it looks like the sacrifice does successfully function as a challenge. But the above description depends on the fact that value is destroyed in the act of leaving your job—it is this that renders the act a kind of potlach, a symbolic challenge to the other. But what if the act of quitting failed to destroy any value? This might be the case if, for example, after leaving your job you make a big noise about it on social media, write columns for the Guardian about how important it is that we put people before profits, effectively using this act of 'sacrifice' as the basis of a new career. In this case the value represented by the original job has not in fact been destroyed, but converted into a different form of value—what Baudrillard called sign value—which is attached to the act of quitting itself. This sign value is in effect extracted as surplus and can be circulated independently, as evidenced by the fact that it can be reconverted back into career capital in a different context. But if this is the case, then it is clear that the original act of quitting can no longer communicate a genuine challenge. The conversion of the act into sign value subsumes it under the logic of self-interest, and thus undermines its ability to address the other as a *moral* agent. What we are describing is, of course, the operation of the structural law of value. Under the commodity law, value was indexed to the job itself—quitting it is therefore an unequivocal sign of value's destruction. But under the structural law, value is attached not to the job itself but the job *as a signifier*, which exchanges freely against those which define it in contrast. In this sense the lucrative job with the flashy but unethical company is sign equivalent to that of the subversive journalist who exposes the unethical practices of flashy companies, similar to the symbiosis between the traditional masculinity enthusiast and their feminist critic. In this we see exactly how the structural law of value undermines the possibility of symbolic challenge: every time anyone attempts to destroy value—the act of potlach required to secure the credibility of the challenge—they are automatically refunded in sign value.

Within the context defined by the structural law, a credible symbolic challenge can only be issued by an act which actually *destroys* sign value, rather than merely exchanges or circulates it. What this requires, I would argue, is a kind of double refusal: not just the refusal of career capital represented by the job, but the further refusal of the social capital gained by the first refusal. And it is the second refusal that is the important one, insofar as sign value is concerned. In this respect moral sacrifice is perhaps not an ideal vehicle for this strategy, since moral sacrifice always and automatically accrues high sign value. And of course there is nothing in Baudrillard to suggest any kind of moralism along these lines. In Baudrillard what is stressed is challenge that takes the form of arbitrary, ritualistic sacrifice, perhaps best illustrated in his essay *Please Follow Me*, a commentary accompanying the publication of Sophie Calle's photographic project *Suite Venitienne*, which, as William Pawlett describes it, "consisted of her following someone she hardly knew from Paris to Venice and back,

photographing him and the places he visited. Yet Calle, at least according to Baudrillard's commentary, had no intention of getting to know this person, and certainly no sexual agenda. Instead a subtle game or ritual is played out." (Pawlett, 2007, p. 158) What is sacrificed here is one's own whims and choices, by making one's actions obliged to the command of the other. The material severity of these sacrifices is not as important as the second, symbolic sacrifice: the sacrifice of one's practical identity as it is constituted by the structural law of value, the rule that there are no rules—the rule that says that the only binding determinant of one's actions is one's own whims and desires. In arbitrarily binding herself to the whim of the other, Calle both undergoes a symbolic death with regard to the structural law and unequivocally addresses it as a challenge to that other.

> *The other's tracks are used in such a way as to distance you from yourself. You exist only in the trace of the other, but without his being aware of it; in fact, you follow your own almost without knowing it yourself. […] You seduce yourself by being absent, by being no more than a mirror for the other who is unaware—as with Kierkegaard's mirror, hanging on the opposite wall: The young girl doesn't think of it, but the mirror does. You seduce yourself into the other's destiny, the double of his path, which, for him, has meaning, but when repeated, does not. It's as if someone behind him knew that he was going nowhere—it is in some way robbing him of his objective: seducing him. The cunning demon of seduction slips between him and himself, between you and him. This is so powerful that people can often sense they are being followed, through some sort of intuition that something has penetrated their space, altering its curvature—a feeling of being reflected without knowing it. (Calle & Baudrillard, 1988, pp. 77–78)*

Arbitrary ritual commitment of this kind entails the sacrifice one's practical identity as an entrepreneur of the sign, as it is constituted by the structural law. It is in this sense a potlach of sign value—since the symbolic economy defined by this law, regulated through the universal equivalence of sign value, it is only through its destruction that the secret rule can be reversed. The paradox of Calle's project is that while it may be the most pure example we have of this strategy, it still does not quite succeed. Indeed it is the very moment at which the project is unified in its documentation, each photo arranged on the page with tastefully large margins, bound in hardcover, accompanied by a text by none other than Jean Baudrillard, and placed before the public gaze, that whatever sacrificial ritual is represented within its pages is extracted as surplus and cashed in as sign value. Calle's project would have been the perfect example, but only if she had never published it. And here is the paradox: anything that is *visible* within the symbolic economy of the present is always already valorised according to its law. In this sense the structural law is fundamentally an optical determination, an injunction to appear. To destroy sign value is to disappear before the gaze of the 'public' as it is constructed by this law. In double refusal one disappears, and it is only in this disappearance that the real is challenged to appear.

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